

Gender Questions

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# Gender

# Questions



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## **Gender Questions**

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*Gender Questions* is a peer-reviewed journal that is affiliated to Unisa's Institute for Gender Studies and is published by Unisa Press. Its aim is to serve as a forum for scholarly research on all aspects of gender studies, including feminist research, studies in masculinities, LGBT and queer studies. In addition to refereed articles it publishes book reviews of noteworthy new texts in the field of gender studies.

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## The construction of gender through discourse on the social network Badoo: Exploring virtual interaction

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### Abstract

Nowadays many meetings and conversations take place through social networks. Badoo.com is one of the best known, with more than 102 million users in 2010. This article concentrates on communication through the chat in Badoo between 150 men and the author. The study analyses the main linguistic characteristics in the conversations (orthography, use of capital letters, emoticons and strategies of courtesy and discourtesy) in order to observe how gender is constructed in interaction. The analysis shows that the conversations have characteristics of oral discourse. Moreover, the author prepared five questions as a survey in order to observe what men expected from Badoo, what their values and hobbies were, if they would like to marry and the characteristics they value in women. The analysis of the survey results shows how the participants in the virtual interactions investigated here, negotiate their gender identities.

**Keywords:** chat, cyberpragmatics, discourse analysis, gender, Internet, virtual interaction

### Introduction

Discourse is language in use, in other words, language joined to context. For this reason, critical discourse analysis (CDA) pays attention to authentic texts as examples of meaningful expressions in a determined social context – in Woods' words (2007, p. x):

Discourse is, at the very least, language plus context – by which I mean the context that we bring with us when we use language; the context that includes our experience, assumptions and expectations; the context we change (and which is itself changed) in our relationships with others, as we both construct and negotiate our way through the social practices of the world we live in.

The different discourses that take place in our society are framed by interpersonal relationships between the participants in interaction. In those interactions speakers can use all the different options available in the system of language, and choose vocabulary and grammatical structures by taking into consideration their communicative end.

Language expresses meanings and it is also a tool to express meanings. Studies on discourse highlight the relationships between language and society (Alexander 2008; Blackledge 2009; Fairclough 1995; Farr 2010; Llamas and Watt 2010; O'Grady 2010; Renkema 2009; Teubert 2010). Following the principles of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and critical discourse analysis (CDA), the potential of the system of language will be explored as it manifests in the

social network Badoo. The purpose of this study is to observe the main linguistic characteristics in the conversations analysed: orthography, the use of capital letters and emoticons, and strategies of courtesy and discourtesy.

The theoretical frameworks previously mentioned see language as a social practice. They employ analytical methods of discourse in order to observe the role language has in maintaining and legitimising social relations (Van Leeuwen 2009, p. 277). In this way, it is observed that the social function of language is not just to communicate information, but that language is also a resource used to negotiate social activities (Cameron *et al.* 1992, p. 78). In this sense, gender is also developed in discourse, i.e., masculine or feminine behaviour is socially constructed (West *et al.* 1997, p. 119). Following on from what has been noted regarding language–context relations, language is therefore understood not only as a linguistic system but also a social system, such that when studying language an attempt is made to examine the different social phenomena in which it is framed (Blommaert 2010, p. 3; Kress 2010, p. 240). The approach employed here is also social, because the different persons who intervene in the linguistic exchanges have social histories framed in a determined culture, as Thompson and Muntigl (2008, p. 127) make clear:

The most obvious application [of SFL] is in achieving a better understanding of how language functions in establishing and maintaining social and personal relationships and, beyond that, the broader cultural norms of behaviour. It is important to stress that Systemic Functional Linguistics does not see language use as simply reflecting those norms: language has a central role in constructing them.

Choosing a functional approach to language shifts the focus onto the end speakers have in mind within communicative situations, such as the interactions between women and men in the online social network site Badoo, under scrutiny in this study. In consequence, the context in which the different interactions take place is essential in order to understand meaning.

This article is organised in the following way: first it offers a literature review which pays attention to research on language and gender, virtual communication and Badoo; the next section focuses on the methodology and the main steps followed in the research process. Finally, attention is paid to the main results obtained from the survey and the discussion, after which some conclusions are offered.

## **Literature review: Gender and interaction on Badoo**

Every day, people participate in different social encounters in which there is communicative interchange (directly or indirectly) with other human beings. Verbal and non-verbal factors are present in each meeting, and it is evident that gender influences the extent to which those factors vary.

Research on language and gender has shown that there are differences in the way women and men speak (Cameron and Kulick 2003; Coates 2007; Holmes 1994; Holmes and Meyerhoff 2003; Jule 2008; Martín Rojo and Gómez Esteban 2007; Mullany 2007). These studies show that women are cooperative facilitators who care about their words; on the other hand, men tend to speak longer and interrupt more than women (Cameron 1997, 1998; Goddard and Patterson 2005; Holmes 1994; Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert and Leap 2000; Tannen 1990).

Gender is a social construction of people's behaviour, which also covers their linguistic behaviour, in Jule's words (2008, p. 6): 'Gender performances are not universal, but gender as a social construct is a universal factor influencing the way people live their lives and understand each other.'

Gender is constantly performed and has to be reaffirmed in determined situations, depending on cultural rules which are defined socially and historically, in such a way that masculinity and femininity are constructed (Butler 2004, p. 1; Cameron 1997, p. 49). Gender is reflected in verbal interactions in such a way that there is a relationship between language and identity, as essential elements of human experience (Llamas and Watt 2010, p. 1).

We live in a globalised society in which interpersonal relationships have changed considerably. Many meetings, friendships and conversations now take place or are maintained via the Internet (Espinari Ruiz and González Río 2008, 2009; Rubio Liniers 2003). Previous studies make clear that there are differences in the ways of interpreting gender and discourse in physical or virtual interactions, because when communicating online it is possible to remain anonymous as an individual, or to pose as someone else (Senft 2008; Turkle 2011).

Over the past few years, the main advances in the use of the Internet have occurred in respect of social networks, wikis (the best-known being Wikipedia), personal media (*Me Media*, cf. Garfield 2006), culture or participative web (Jenkins *et al.* 2006), Web 2.0 (cf. O'Reilly 2005, 2007), social software and even C Generation (C from 'contents' and 'creativity', cf. Bruns 2006) and user-generated content, among others. Yus (2001) created the term 'cyberpragmatics' to apply the theory of pragmatics to discourse found on the Internet. Cyberpragmatics concentrates on analysing the main characteristics of the communication people use on the Internet, so as to juxtapose the main differences with face-to-face communication. In this way, language and context are analysed together.

Herring (in press), who has studied the characteristics of online discourse over the past 17 years, refers to computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) as an approach to analysing computer-mediated communication (CMC); it focuses on language and language use online, to determine the properties of digital communication media. The author also researched the main differences between women and men's online discourse (Herring, in press, p. 10): 'Gender differences in discourse style were documented in public online discussion forums and chat rooms throughout the 1990s that showed males to be more assertive, insulting, sarcastic, and profane and females to be more accommodating, supportive, affectionate, and upbeat.' The communication that takes place on the Internet modifies the public representation of people's identity, and as such presents a challenge for the study of human communication (Belson 1994; Vidal Jiménez 2000). For that reason, this article will focus on conversations that take place in chatrooms on the social network site Badoo. The chat, as Yus (2001, p. 139) points out,

[...] es una nueva forma de comunicación, un híbrido entre la estabilidad y la formalidad de la letra impresa, por un lado, y la cualidad efímera e informal del habla. [...] a new way of communication, it is a mixture between the stability and the formality of the printed letter, on the one hand, and the ephemeral and informal property of speech] (translation by the author).

Badoo.com, one of the more popular social networks, with its headquarters in London, was created by a group of young Russian and British experts in computer science in 2006. Their main aim was to establish a social network forum that breaches social frontiers. The chief objectives, for users, are to get to know people with similar interests or to find a partner. It allows contact with people who live near (the page can be searched accordingly) or far away. Badoo allows users to chat, to show photographs and videos, to create a profile to share interests and hobbies, to state what they are looking for in life and who they are. Moreover, as happens in all social networks, it allows users to interact with other users by commenting on their profiles or inviting and accepting them as friends.

Navigating in Badoo is easy: it uses Javascripts and the structure of the site is very clear, making use of icons and buttons to guide browsers in a highly attractive way. In 2010, Badoo had a total of 102 million users in more than 180 countries (it is available in 22 languages). Badoo functions as a hybrid between closed social networks such as Facebook and the more open dating websites such as Match.com (Yus 2011).

Two types of virtual communities are usually identified: synchronic, as happens in the chatroom where participants are connected to the Internet simultaneously; and asynchronous, as happens in newsgroups, which keep a record of all the different interactions and therefore create a complex, common framework (Yus 2001, p. 57).

Interaction on Badoo is normally synchronic, although it can also be asynchronous because people can leave written messages in the chatroom for people who are not connected at the same time or send an introductory message saying that they would like to meet someone whose profile they found interesting.

An analysis of the way men talk to women on the social network site Badoo reveals how spontaneous interactions are produced. It is interesting to observe the structure of the language used to exchange meaning in a virtual environment: men usually start the conversation in these virtual exchanges, which reflects the traditional way of establishing relationships. According to Simón Rodríguez (2008, p. 8):

Las antiguas formas sexistas y machistas de relación y de organización social ya no son válidas, pero permanecen en la sombra o a la luz del día e impiden avances hacia la equidad, producen desencuentros y apartan a las mujeres y a los hombres de vidas más saludables. [The old forms of sexism and manliness and of social organisation are not valid any more, but they are kept in the shadow or in the light and they avoid advances towards equality, they produce misunderstandings and they put women and men apart from more healthy lives] (translation by the author).

This idea aligns with the fact that men have more power and their voices are better represented than those of women in Western and oriental societies (Kiesling 1997; Martínez Lirola 2010).

## Methodology and main steps in the research

### Participants and context: Research design

This study comprised 400 conversations between five women and 150 men with profiles on Badoo. These men wrote to the respective women in order to get to know them, invite them out on a date, they proposed sex, etc. The conversations took place between October and December 2010.

The context in which these conversations took place is obviously virtual, because it is via the chatroom that users who are registered on Badoo have access to other users/subscribers. As Yus (2001, p. 79) makes clear:

La conversación virtual por Internet, conocida coloquialmente como chat (tomado del término inglés, charlar), es una conversación oral en un soporte escrito, una nueva forma de comunicación con sus propios códigos de funcionamiento. [The virtual conversation via the Internet, colloquially known as 'chat' (taken from the English), is an oral conversation with written support – a new form of communication with its own codes] (translation by the author).

### Profiles

The analysis shows that the majority of people registered on Badoo (70 %) use their first name, which can be real or not, instead of a nickname, which is the most common way of appearing on the Internet, as Yus (2010, p. 59) points out:

El apodo (*nickname o nick*) es una forma más de representación de la persona en Internet. En variedades de comunicación sincrónica como el *chat*, estos alias son muy comunes (a menudo un requisito) y de inmediato surge el interrogante de qué relación puede haber entre la persona real que existe tras el apodo, y las connotaciones contextuales que aporta la elección de un determinado apodo ... [The nickname (Nick) is another way of representing people on the Internet. In varieties of synchronic communication, such as the chat, these aliases are very common (sometimes they are a requirement and immediately we wonder about the relationship between the real person that exists behind the nickname, and the contextual connotations that provide the choice of a determined nickname ...] (translation by the author).

The fact that people can use a nickname or pseudonym on the Internet shows how easy it is to modify their identity and personality on the web, or to construct alternative, specifically online, identities. This can be problematic when the boundaries between their virtual and their real lives are crossed.

The men who interacted specifically with the author were between 30 and 45 years of age, and their jobs varied: auditor, mechanic, electrician, waiter, builder, pharmacist. Of them, 74 per cent did not have a university degree. Their level of education varied, and this was evident in the way they wrote. The photographs the men posted on their profiles were also heterogeneous – some posted pictures with their friends at the beach or hiking, while others appeared shirtless or in a bathing costume which revealed a great deal of their bodies.



## Results and discussion

This section concentrates on the main linguistic characteristics observed in the conversations that form part of the corpus of examples. The author decided to prepare questions as part of a survey to be taken from all the men who interacted with her. The questions are the following:

1. What do you look for in Badoo? Of the respondents, 50 per cent pointed out that they wanted to find a partner, 30 per cent wanted friendship and 20 per cent said 'whatever comes' (to talk, to spend time, to share, etc.).
2. What do you value in a woman? Here, 75 per cent expected women to be loving, romantic and faithful, which shows the representation of certain gender stereotypes; 30 per cent attached importance to women being independent, having a sense of humour or hobbies.
3. What are your values? Of the respondents, 40 per cent asked for clarification, because they did not know what was meant by 'values'. The answers were diverse: to be honest, not to lie, to have a sense of humour.
4. What are your hobbies? Here, 77 per cent responded that their main hobbies were doing sports such as running, swimming or playing football; 23 per cent said going out with friends, going out for dinner or going to the cinema.
5. Do you want to get married? Of the respondents, 73 per cent said yes, 20 per cent said no and seven per cent were unsure – it depended on whether their partner wanted to or not. It is surprising that so many men want to get married and it is suspicious that so many gave a positive answer – possibly because they think this is the answer a woman would expect.

## General characteristics of interactions on Badoo

Following Yus (2001, p. 80), the main characteristics observed in the conversations recorded on Badoo are the following: interaction takes place in text form; personal information can be manipulated; people can interact yet be in different geographical areas; communication can be synchronic or asynchronous; the messages can only be read by the two people involved in a conversation, although it is possible to write general comments expressing an opinion on each profile on the web page; people can participate in different interactions, i.e., they can chat with a different person at the same time without the other being aware of it; the users do not know each other; and it is compulsory to post a picture in a personal profile before chatting on Badoo.

The conversations that take place on Badoo show characteristics of oral discourse in that their style is informal, since it is necessary to send the messages quickly (as in a conversation) and to read them quickly, and it is also important to establish interpersonal connections quickly and effectively. For this reason, those interacting on Badoo write what they would like to say at that particular moment. Consequently, there are frequently orthographic errors due to speed typing, as well as incomplete sentences (Mayans 2002). As Yus (2010, p. 185) points out:

*Las teclas del ordenador ofrecen al usuario una cierta gama de posibilidades para connotar su texto con una sensación de oralidad y para compensar la falta de cualidades vocales del texto escrito (Reid, 1994: 31–32; Ruedenberg et al., 1994). Jaffe et al. (1995) etiquetan esta gama como emotextos, un término de amplio espectro que incluiría las variaciones intencionadas en la ortografía (ej., dialecto visual), el uso estratégico de las mayúsculas, las sustituciones léxicas (pistas metalingüísticas de connotación paraverbal, por ejemplo escribir 'hmmmm', los marcadores gramaticales (por ejemplo, el uso reiterado de exclamaciones), y las composiciones icónicas- emoticonos). Todo vale para comunicar la sensación de que el texto posee las cualidades de un enunciado oral. [The computer's keys offer the user a variety of possibilities to connote her/his text with a sense of orality and to compensate for the lack of vocal qualities of the written text (...). Jaffe et al. (1995) label this range as emotexts, a wide term that includes the intended varieties in orthography (e.g. visual dialect), the strategic use of capital letters, lexical substitutions (metalinguistic clues or paraverbal connotations, for example writing 'hmmmm', the grammatical markers (e.g., the reiterated use of exclamations), and the iconic compositions-emoticons. Everything is valid to communicate the sensation that the text has the qualities of an oral enunciation] (translation by the author).*

It is relevant here to refer briefly to the variable tenor in the SFL theory of context, which refers to the relationship between the different participants in a communicative situation: for example, formal/informal or hierarchic relationships accompanying the use of different types of language. It is expected that users are familiar with a specific register (or discursive mode [Halliday 1978]) in such chats, which are characterised by informality and demands a relationship between the participants ('tenor' [see Halliday 1978]). The relationship in this study is based on equality, because in general no participant has more power than another – a characteristic of everyday informal interactions between friends or those aspiring to develop friendships.

## Linguistic characteristics

The following section concentrates on the main linguistic characteristics observed in the conversations recorded on Badoo.

### Emoticons

Danet (1996) and Yus (2001, 2010, 2011) identify the main strategies used in virtual communication, while Byron and Baldridge (2007) and Byron (2008) point out the connotative use of capital letters and emoticons as strategies to communicate feelings and emotions in e-mails. These strategies are also present in this corpus of conversations, as is evident in the examples below.

Many men use the emoticon :-) at the beginning of the conversation to show that they are happy to establish contact, and to break the ice. That is why emoticons are commonly found once they have started the interaction by saying: 'Hello, how are you?' or 'Hi, would you like to chat with me?' Often, when a man proposes a date and the woman declines, men use the emoticon that shows self-pity, i.e., :( . In this regard, Yus (2010, p. 188) notes the following on the use of emoticons:

Una de las formas más comunes de suplir la ausencia del canal virtual en los chats es el uso de *textos*

icónicos denominados *emoticonos* (del inglés *emoticon*, tomado de *emotive* y *icon*), también llamado *smilie* (del inglés *smiley*) por algunos usuarios (Quinion, 1996). Se trata de combinaciones de signos de puntuación simples cuya unión (y una vez que el lector haya girado la vista 90 grados hacia la izquierda) parece formar diferentes expresiones de la cara y otros signos icónicos más sofisticados (sonrisa =-) enfado =:-( etc). [One of the most common ways of replacing the absence of the virtual channel in chats is the use of iconic texts called emoticons (taken from emotive and icon), also called *smilie* (from English *smiley*) by some users (Quinion, 1996). They are the combination of simple punctuation signs whose union (once the reader has rotated her/his eyes 90° towards the left) seems to create different expressions of the face and other iconic signs which are more sophisticated (smile = :-) annoyance = :-( etc.)] (translation by the author).

Capital letters are not often used in the conversations analysed (only in 20%) and they are mainly used to check whether the person being chatted to is still on Badoo. Examples include:

ARE YOU THERE? (¿ESTÁS AHÍ?)

ARE YOU STILL CONNECTED? (¿SIGUES CONECTADA?)

HI, ARE YOU STILL READING ME? (HOLA, ¿ME SIGUES LEYENDO?).<sup>1</sup>

## Orthography

One of the main characteristics observed in the conversations analysed here, is the way in which orthography differs from the standard, in order to adhere to two main characteristics: to be colloquial and prosodic.

- **Colloquial:** reducing words due to the way they are pronounced in oral conversations. None of the conversations analysed show the use of *tildes* (the written accent in Spanish). This characteristic occurred in 92 per cent of the conversations analysed. Examples include:

*ola ola, en lugar de hola; q tal? En lugar de qué tal?; voy a a hacer dxt (en lugar de deporte), es por si te apetia charlar ...* [Hi, hi how are you, I am going to play sports, would you like to chat ...].

The letter k is commonly found instead of *que* for reasons of linguistic economy:

*me parece estupendo aprovecha tu ke puedes, ke trabajas por las mañanicas mas a gusto ke un san Luis; pues en un principio k me llame la atencion su exterior, no k sea especialmente wapa sino k le vea algo diferente y luego su personalidad; de todo hay en la viña del señor chikilla; pero no hace falta entrar aki para darse cuenta.* [That is great, take advantage of it because you can, since you work only in the morning. Firstly I like the physical appearance of a woman, although she is not really beautiful I look for something different, and then here personality; we are all sorts little girl, but it is not necessary to be in Badoo to be aware of that.]

- **Prosodic:** prosodic patterns of voice are suggested through the use of capital letters, the repetition of certain letters or the use of punctuation such as exclamation marks. This type of orthography appears in 95 per cent of the examples analysed:

– Multiple punctuation marks: *a ver si te animas más!!!!* [cheer up!], *qué te gusta hacer???* [what do you like doing???]. Punctuation is characterised by the use of the final question mark or exclamation marks, as is the case in English. The question mark or exclamation mark that should appear at the beginning therefore disappears.

– Excentric orthography: *Trabajaarrrrrrrrr; ke hace una tia tan intelectual y preparada como tu...en un sitio como esteeeeeeeee; hay tantas opcionessss; holaaaaaaaaaaaaa holaaaaaaaaaaaaa; dios mio de mi vidaaaaaaa hay alguna tarde ke descansessssss; yo de mayor kiero ser como tuuuuuuu; a valeeee con tranquilidadddddd, eoeoeoeoeoeoeo. [Workingggggggg, what is a girl as intellectual and well prepared as you doing in a place like thissssss; there are so many optionssssss; hiiiiiii; oh my God, is there any afternoon in which you are free; when I grow up I want to be like youuuu; Ok slowlyyyyyy, eoeoeoeoeoeoeo].*

– Capital letters: ANGRY

– Written smile: *jajaja!!* [ahaha in English]: *jajaja; jajajaja siiii tienes razonnnnnnn; ajajajjaa; upssss; ajajjaa* [ahaha you are righttttt].

– Descriptions of actions: \*I am waiting for your reply\*

– Emoticons: :-)(happy) and :-(sad) are commonly found, occurring in 36 per cent of the conversations in this corpus.

– Unusual space between letters: *¿EST AS?, ¿C O M O D I C E S?* [ARE YOU THERE?, WHAT DO YOU SAY?]

– Interjections: *uins por poco; ainsss... ya no estás, ainssssss, ainssssssssssss, Ums* [Uins almost, ainsss you are not there ainssssss, ainssssssssssss, Ums].

There are spelling mistakes in some examples. For instance, there (*ahí*) and there (*hay*) are confused in the following example: *estás hay?* [are you there?]. Moreover, it is common for the first letter of one word to be linked to the last letter of the preceding word, when people type fast: *no los abia* (*en lugar de no lo sabía*) [I did not know], *o tev as?* (*en lugar de te vas?*) [are you leaving?]. When question marks or exclamation marks are used, only the final punctuation mark appears, never the first.

As regards morphology, a few examples of clippings, acronyms and abbreviations are found in the corpus. It is very common to abbreviate the word *también* [too, also] by using *tb*, and *fin de semana* with *finde* [weekend]: *bueno disfruta tu tb del finde* [well enjoy your weekend as well].

## Strategies of courtesy and discourtesy

The term *chatiquette* (from chat and etiquette), whose translation would be 'cyber manners' is used in many manuals to refer to the rules of courtesy specific of chats (see Jonsson 1998; chapter 3 and concrete rules in Grossman 2000). As Yús (2010, p. 275) notes:

*La cortesía es una estrategia típicamente humana destinada a favorecer las relaciones entre los semejantes y mitigar la imposición de determinadas acciones a otras personas. A pesar de este atributo universal, la cortesía se expresa de forma diferente en cada cultura.* [Courtesy is a typically human strategy used to favour relationships and mitigate the imposition of certain actions to other people. Although it is a universal attribute, courtesy is expressed in different ways in each culture] (translation by the author).

There are different expressions of courtesy in the conversations analysed: '*Si me lo permites quisiera presentarme*', '*Te apetece hablar conmigo?*' [If I may, I would like to introduce myself; do you feel like talking to me?]. Moreover, another way of being polite towards a woman is to use positive adjectives:

*'Hola princesa', 'hola bellisima', 'hola preciosa', 'hola poliglota guapa', 'hola guapa', 'Hola niña guapa'* [Hi princess, hi beautiful, hi precious, hello beautiful polyglot, hello beautiful, hello beautiful girl].

*'Hola, mee encantaria conocerte, eres bellisima y muy sensual'* [Hi I would love to meet you, you are very beautiful and sensual].

*'Hola, que sonrisa tan bella y que guapa sales en la foto, felicidades y besos'* [Hello, what a beautiful smile, you look very beautiful in the photograph, congratulations and kisses].

*'HOLA CORAZON, RECUERDA QUE TU PUEDES SER UNA PERSONA PARA EL MUNDO, PERO PARA UNA PERSONA TU PUEDES SER EL MUNDO, SEGURAMENTE LOS SIENTIFICOS NO SABEN TODAVIA QUE TU ERES UNA DE LAS MARABILLAS DEL MUNDO SI TE DESCUBREN IRAN POR TI ERES MUY HERMOSA'*. [Hello, sweetheart, remember that you can be a person to the world but you can be the world to one person. I am sure scientists do not know yet that you are one of the wonders of the world, if they discover you they will go for you, you are very beautiful].

*'BUENOS DIAS, SI ME LO PERMITES QUERIA MANDARTE UN SALUDO Y DESEARTE TENGAS UN DIA GENIAL...'* [Good morning, if you allow me, I would like to send greetings and wish you a good day].

Courtesy is related to the maxim of approbation (Leech 1983), because it consists of minimising criticism towards others while maximising praise, as is evident in the preceding examples. Moreover, another way of being polite is to use superlatives (*bellisima, guapisima*) [very beautiful, very good looking], diminutives (*besitos, un besito, un besazo*) [little kisses, a little kiss, a big

kiss] or adjectives preceded by the focusing adverb *muy* [very] (*muy guapa, muy interesante*) [very beautiful, very interesting].

Certain rude expressions are, however, also used. Yus (2010, p. 284) notes:

La grosería, por otro lado, es una desviación de aquello que se entiende como cortés en un contexto social, es de enfrentamiento inherente y perjudicial para el equilibrio social. [Coarseness, on the one hand, is a deviation from what is understood as politeness in a social context, it is inherently confrontational and prejudicial in terms of social balance] (translation by the author).

Rude expressions include *joer* [fuck you] and *o mierda* [shit], which appear mainly when people continue chatting and one individual discovers that the other is not connected.

The only two rude or forward expressions that appear in the conversations analysed are: '*te he preguntado si has pensado en quedar para que peguemos un buen polvo*'. [I asked if you would like to meet to fuck] and '*voulez vous coche avec moi ce soir*' [would you like to sleep with me tonight?]. The author was invited to participate in a threesome:

hola somos una pareja y buscamos una chica para trio o pareja no tenemos experiencia queremos conocer alguien e ir poco a poco si te interesa este es nuestro email XXX@hotmail.com pedimos discreción y buena presencia y ante todo buen rollo si no te interesa perdona por haberte molestado. [Hi, we are a couple and we are looking for a girl to create a trio or couple. We do not have experience, we want to know somebody and go slowly. If you are interested, this is our e-mail XXX@hotmail.com.<sup>2</sup> We ask you to be discreet and good looking and to radiate positive energy. If you are not interested, sorry for bothering you] (translation by the author).

## Conclusion

It is impossible to adequately analyse language if it is separated from the social context in which it is used and interpreted. To analyse the language used on Badoo it is necessary to pay attention to the characteristics of oral discourse, as they appear in the messages in chats reflected here. The author's analysis of the answers to her survey show that the participants in the virtual interactions, under analysis here, negotiated their gender identities.

The profiles of the men who interacted with the author are varied. However, in their interactions on Badoo, many characteristics common to oral communication could be noted, along with the innovative use of language (multiple punctuation, eccentric orthography, emoticons, etc.). Although the respondents provided written answers, these reflected what they would say if the person they were chatting to were in front of them. Clearly, the written medium is being used to realise a mode of discourse that resembles the spoken word (Halliday 1978).

Users understand masculinity and femininity in different ways (as well as the models of communicative behaviour as they pertain to the different sexes) in face-to-face or virtual communication. For example, the analysis shows that men take the initiative to interact on Badoo, thus existing gender stereotypes are reinforced (they expect women to be receptive rather than active, sweet and loving rather than challenging or aggressive, etc.).

Some of the main disadvantages of Badoo include the following: the published photographs are not verified/moderated and may therefore be fraudulent or near nudity may be an issue; the majority of contacts stem from people's physical appearance, which is why some are more provocative; children/teenagers have access to this social site on which flirting occurs; the site has not been updated recently; it is not as handy for chatting as MSN is; Badoo does not allow users to block contacts. On the other hand, some of the main advantages include the following: it is easy to access Badoo because anyone can register without invitation; registration is free and deregistering is simple; it is an easy way to get to know people; it allows the user to chat with other people; registered Badoo users have a profile which allows them to personalise those details they wish to post.

This article allowed the author to investigate a new way of meeting people and establishing social relations in a virtual environment. Not meeting face to face makes Badoo perfect for starting a friendship or a love relationship, as far as many people are concerned. It allows users to chat freely – or, at least, more freely than would otherwise be possible – and to approach people in a natural way, just as they would through an informal conversation in a physical environment. As the examples presented here show, through discourse analysis of language in relation to its social context, one can learn more about social interactions in the contemporary online world, as constructed through language, and in comparison to other more traditional forms and media of communication.

## Notes

1. Spanish examples appear as in the original virtual interactions, that is why certain words are spelled incorrectly.
2. The original e-mail address has been substituted by XXX.

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